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STATE DEPT FOR WHA/CCA

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SUBJECT: CUBAN GOVT RELEASES DETAINEE RENE GOMEZ MANZANO

REF: HAVANA 106

Classified By: COM Michael Parmly for Reason 1.4(d).

11. (C) In a surprise move, the Cuban Government released prominent dissident Rene Gomez Manzano on February 8, after holding him without charge (reftel) following a 2005 protest. Gomez left Nieves Morejon prison in Sancti Spiritus province at 11 am and was driven to his Havana home, arriving around 4 pm. The release of Gomez, an attorney and senior official of Martha Beatriz Roque's Assembly to Promote Civil Society, was confirmed by Roque and Gomez's brother Jorge, who waged a lengthy court battle on his behalf. Gomez spent 567 days behind bars for allegedly taking part in a protest outside the French Embassy on July 22, 2005. In fact, he did not participate in that event. The release came five days after the Government freed two other political detainees held over the same protest: Raul Martinez Prieto and Julio Cesar Lopez Rodriguez.

12. (C) Meanwhile, the GOC continued its intense campaign of harassment against other dissidents, especially youth activists. The Marti Youth Coalition said that during the past week, the GOC confiscated its computer and printer; summoned its leader, Edgard Lopez Moreno, to the police station; forcibly deported its Havana chief, Wilson Reina Cabrera, to Holguin, warning him that he would be jailed for four years if he returned to Havana, where his wife lives; and had a maternity hospital in Havana dismiss another member of the group, without explanation. During the same period, the Cuban Movement of Youth for Democracy reported that the regime issued citations to two of its members, including its Santiago-based national coordinator, Gerardo Sanchez Ortega. During the week, USINT learned of at least two other dismissals made on political grounds. One was Juan Antonio Bermudez Toranzo, of the Cuban Human Rights Foundation, who the Cuban Federation of Martial Arts expelled after he took part in the December 10, 2006 human rights march organized by Dr. Darsi Ferrer. He was told that he could no longer represent the Federation, as he was a counter-revolutionary.

COMMENT

13. (C) The regime continues to make a concerted effort to reduce the number of high-profile documented political prisoners and detainees, which now stands at 279 or 280. However, we have seen an intensification in the level of harassment aimed at pro-democracy advocates and human rights activists. Some in Cuba's human rights community anticipate more releases in the near term - either in a piecemeal way, as has been the case in recent weeks, or with a large release of 20, 50 or even 250 political prisoners. We view the latest releases as further evidence that Fidel Castro is no

longer calling the shots, or at least not in the hands-on, micro-managing manner for which he is famous. Raul and his henchmen in turn are trying to create an impression of forward movement through isolated, "eye-dropper" paced releases of detainees (not convicted political prisoners). While the release of dozens or even hundreds of political prisoners and detainees would be a very positive development, it would not obviate the need for other key reforms, such as the holding of free, multi-party elections and the repeal of repressive laws, such as the "dangerousness" statute, for which thousands of Cubans are currently and unjustly imprisoned.

PARMLY